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## India gifts 3 Airbus aircraft to Afghanistan

India on Tuesday gifted three Airbus-300 aircraft to Afghanistan to help the Karzai government augment and strengthen its dilapidated airline.

The three planes, owned by Air-India, will be operated by Indian pilots for three months to enable Ariana, Afghanistan's official carrier, to start its flights to London, Frankfurt and Paris besides Tashkent, Teheran and possibly Islamabad.

The agreement to this effect was signed by Civil Aviation Minister Syed Shahnawaz Hussain and his Afghan counterpart Zalmy Rasool, after the two held extensive talks on bilateral co-operation in the aviation sector.

Asked when Indian Airlines would resume flights to Afghanistan, Hussain said that since the Pakistan air corridor was closed to Indian planes the government was holding talks with China on using its air space.

Rasool said Afghanistan had sought India's help in rebuilding its aviation infrastructure, including the Kabul airport, training of pilots and ground staff and upgrading its air traffic control and other systems.

Hussain said the first of the three A-300 B4 will be delivered to Afghanistan before the end of the month to facilitate Ariana to operate the aircraft from June 1 in the Afghan airline's colours. Retired Air India pilots may also join Ariana later on, he added.

The 18 to 20 year old Airbuses, being phased out by Air-India will be bought from the national carrier by the ministry of external affairs for \$7 million and then gifted to Afghanistan.

The Afghan delegation will go to Mumbai to have a look at the aircraft. Afghanistan was keenly looking towards India for help in resurrecting its aviation sector which was why his first visit outside the war-ravaged country after taking over as civil aviation minister was to India, Rasool said.

Ariana presently has two Boeing-727s and flies to Delhi (once a week), Dubai and Sharjah. It plans to fly more frequencies to India and is improving its office here besides going in for advertising since not many people know that Ariana has resumed flights here, Rasool said.

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## 25 buses donated

The 25 buses donated by the Indian government to the interim government in Afghanistan on Tuesday left the country for Kabul via the Wagah border.

The buses would reach Kabul under tight security after passing through Pakistan.

Despite clearance by the Customs and Immigration authorities at 1400 hours, the buses left India at 1555 hours. The reason for delay in the departure was delay in informing the Customs and Immigration authorities about the details of the Tata Safari gifted by the company to the Afghan transport minister Sayeed Modi.

The Customs and Immigration authorities had intimation about 25 buses. They had to obtain confirmation relating to the Tata Safari for allowing it to move out of the country.

*UNI, PTI*

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